



Research Article

From Material Memory to Algorithmic Consumption: New Materialism and The Digital–Analog Fashion Divide in Zadie Smith's White Teeth

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the current ecological and material problems of fast fashion by examining the shift from analogue to hyper-digital fashion practices. Combining the approaches of new materialism, material ecocriticism, and cognitive narratology, the paper presents the paradigm of the digital-analogue fashion divide. Focusing on Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000) as a historical point of departure for heavy analogue material storytelling, the paper examines contrasting depictions of lively, story-filled fabrics against the lightness and imagery of the fashion world of the 2020s. By analysing the characters of Smith's novel together with current practices of digital fashion, the paper reveals how the virtualisation of clothing leads to environmental devastation. The research claims that the shift from analogue to digital practices of dressmaking cuts off the vital physical and storied ties which provide the basis of material engagement and ecologically informed sensibility. Consequently, this research shows how literary fiction can become material practice, bringing weight back into contemporary clothing practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion in the 21st century has been characterised by a contradiction whereby, as clothing becomes cheaper, disposable, and less durable, its cultural existence becomes infinitely and permanently virtualised. Fast fashion, driven by the dynamics of social media algorithms, fashion shopping apps, and virtual fashion avatars, has turned clothing into an ethereal digital image rather than tangible material artistry. These developments have had dire environmental consequences. For instance, the global fashion industry contributes about ten per cent of global carbon emissions; causes a lot of textile pollution; and dumps synthetic microfibers in marine environments. Although individuals are more environmentally conscious and know of these catastrophes conceptually, there has been an increase in global clothing consumption. There is a great disjuncture between consumers' awareness of the environmental consequences of their actions and actual consumer behaviour. Modern consumers suffer from material alienation, where clothing has become data on a screen rather than a resource-consuming object.

In order to comprehend this discrepancy, this essay proposes a theoretical model that is centred around the distinction between analogue fashion narratives and digital fashion narratives. On one hand, analogue fashion narratives, which are exemplified by literature from the mid to late twentieth century, focus on the tangibility, historicity, and vitality of clothes. On the other hand, digital fashion narratives represent the modern-day world in which dress no longer exists in its tangible form but is performed on screen in a digital form. This shift in the form of clothes contributes to hyper-consumption through the dissociation of consumption from physical awareness.

This analysis employs new materialism and material ecocriticism to examine the shift from material to digital fashion. The material ecocriticism, which is a theoretical framework that views matter as vibrant, active, and expressive, is founded on the works of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Serenella Iovino, and Serpil Oppermann. Clothing is more than mere fabrics covering a static body; it is a participant in matter, constituting reality and having the capacity to shape human bodies and tell stories. Through the dematerialisation of textiles into digital fashion, the material stories of clothes and their relationship with the bodies of human beings dissolve.

Zadie Smith's famous novel, *White Teeth* (2000), has become a major focus in understanding the analogue baseline of this development. The story is set in the multi-ethnic world of postcolonial London in the latter part of the twentieth century. In her novel, Smith uses clothes, textiles, and the decorations of the bodies to depict the psychological struggles of migration, trauma, and cultural assimilation. With the use of material ecocriticism in analysing *White Teeth*, this paper reveals how Alsana Begum and Samad Iqbal live in an analogue world along with the vibrancy of their clothing.

In the following pages of this essay, Smith's analogue benchmark is juxtaposed against the ultra-digital fashion world of the 2020s to show the role that the change from fabrics to images plays in the destruction of the environment. The tension that exists between the analogue memory of the material and

digital mimicry of trends is used to show how literature can be a material actor. The consumption of stories that emphasise the materiality and history of fabrics can help modern-day consumers appreciate material longevity.

Theoretical Framework: New Materialism, Material Ecocriticism, and the Digital-Analogue Divide

To examine how clothing is reconfigured via virtualisation to impact the way we relate to the environment, it becomes necessary for literary and fashion scholars to move away from the semiotic models of fashion that have dominated criticism for decades now. Fashion has been viewed as a textual language or a semiotics of signs due to the popularity of structuralist and post-structuralist theories of fashion. While semiotic analysis is very effective in analysing the symbolism, class relations, and codes in clothing, it fails to acknowledge the physicality and the environmental impact of the same. In fact, in viewing a jacket or a dress as a status symbol through semiotics, one ends up creating a similar abstraction about fashion, which is created in capitalist fast fashion culture. The texture, durability, weight, and production process of the clothing item are overlooked in semiotics.

The reconciliation provided by this paper can be found in new materialism and material ecocriticism, in that they emphasise agency in nature over symbolism associated with humans. Material ecocriticism does not believe in the old Cartesian divide of matter being passive and human consciousness being active. Rather, matter is seen to have thing-power, which is the ability to make an effect on the trajectory or meaning-making process regardless of whether human intervention takes place. In the words of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, matter is a text where the narratives of the world are written. Human and nonhuman bodies live in intra-action.

Directly applied to clothing, garments constitute the most intimate and constant layer of our material surroundings. They are nonhuman actors that have a direct impact on the human body, mood, and behaviour. Every time a person dresses, he becomes part of the assemblage with the object. The thick and robust wool coat performs the influence of its materiality on the human body, mood, and behaviour in ways that are not performed by a light and synthetic nylon jacket. Garments are not just passive means, but they are material partners, which have their own history, absorb human body fluids, become marked with wear, and contribute to the formation of human subjectivity.

If applied to the field of cognitive narratology, this approach gives birth to a revolutionary instrument for the analysis of the great transition from analogue to digital fashion narratives. Cognitive narratology studies the impact of the narrative text on human mental activity. When a reader reads a novel, he does not only interpret symbolic signs from the printed text, but runs the embodied cognitive simulation. The brain perceives descriptions of textures, space, and material weight through the activation of neural pathways connected with real-life experience.

In analogue fashion discourse, an author tells a story involving their characters engaging with clothes as lively, weighty, and storied nonhuman actors. An author who talks about the weight

of a fabric, the friction of the fabric on the body of the character, or any history contained in a particular piece of clothing brings attention to the material discourse of that object. The interaction is simulated by the reader, and the reader experiences the material and emotional weight of the fabric. This creates material attachment and emotional durability – the bond between the individual and the durable object.

Alternatively, a digital fashion narrative is a representation of alienated matter and the phenomenon of ghosting whereby garments lose all of their physicality and thingness. In the 2020s world of digital fashion, clothes are often consumed, performed, and ultimately disposed of in a digital medium. In fast-fashion platforms, there are thousands of fashion trends per day, with clothes appearing only as highly edited digital media that provide instant gratification. In instances where consumers perform fashion via a screen, there is disconnection from the material intra-action of the process. Clothes cease to be heavy, resource-heavy material and become a weightless pixel. Through such dematerialisation of clothes, consumers remain oblivious to the environmental destruction that is happening along global supply chains. By juxtaposing the analogue textures found in mid-twentieth-century novels and digital fashion culture of the 2020s, this paper illustrates how cognitive fashion narratives can be used to restore weight in clothes, thus undermining disposable fashion culture of consumer capitalism.

The Historical Baseline: Material Resonance in *White Teeth*

To comprehend the ways in which digital culture has made the consumer feel alienated from the physicality of clothes, one needs to consider the material landscape of analogue fashion in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. This story unfolds in the postcolonial, multi-ethnic landscape of twentieth-century London, telling the stories of the intertwining histories of the Joneses, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens. Importantly, the story serves as a material, analogue fashion narrative, employing the imagery of clothes, fabrics, and bodily ornamentation in order to describe the internal struggle of migration, trauma, and assimilation. In the world of Smith's London, people live in a very physical world of material interfaces, in which clothes are heavy and tangible.

Indeed, during this time, there was a significant change taking place within the material world. The UK was changing from being a nation based on its manufacturing capabilities and use of tough textiles into becoming a nation whose economy was based on outsourcing of production and importing synthetic products. The older characters of Smith represent the material heritage of the countries formerly colonised by Britain – namely Jamaica and Bangladesh – using hard-wearing textiles to resist cultural displacement. In this environment, clothes are never an abstract concept; they are concrete and thus require maintenance of body and soul.

In doing so, Smith presents an eco-materialist perspective of how capitalism impacts our connection to material things. *White Teeth* shows us that there is a certain kind of psychological strength that comes with having an analogue

relationship with one's clothing, as it relies on the concepts of durability and cultural significance. When this type of connection is cut off because of the processes of modern capitalism, the characters undergo alienation and a fragmented sense of self. With such a materialistic perspective, *White Teeth* is able to provide us with a crucial baseline before the age of screens and algorithmic fashion.

Alsana Begum's *Sari*: Vibrant Matter and Analogue Resilience

The novel's best material ecocritical example comes in the form of Alsana Begum, a Bengali woman who lives in the working-class district of Willesden in London. In the novel, Alsana fights against her Westernisation, in terms of the destruction of her cultural background, by wearing the traditional South Asian clothing called the sari. Within the confines of a traditional semiotic criticism, the wearing of the sari by Alsana would mean that it was only used to symbolise her ethnicity or to reject British clothing conventions. But material ecocriticism allows us to understand that the sari is a material actor in intra-action with her body and maintains her cultural independence.

The sari is an item of clothing that has physical characteristics and a specific manner of wearing. In contrast with Western clothes that are cut and sewn in accordance with the pre-set body form, a sari is simply a piece of unstitched cloth that is five to nine yards long. It should be pleated, tucked, and wrapped around the body of its wearer every day by hand. All this requires certain physical skills and body memory. Thus, for Alsana, the everyday practice of wrapping up in a sari is an intra-action through matter. The somatic responses produced by the fabric—the sensation of the weight of the silk or cotton, the pressure of the pleats on the waist, the friction of the cloth on the shoulders—serve as a material point of stability in an unfamiliar urban setting.

This relationship between Alsana and her clothes directly impacts her geographical view of London. When Alsana moves through the cold concrete streets of Willesden, her bodily movement is affected by the draping and flowing nature of her sari. The sari impacts her environment physically; it tells her how to walk, how to move against the wind, and how to interact with the architectural setting. It becomes an integrated protective shield that shields her not only from the physical cold of England but also from the psychological coldness of cultural isolation. In this process of interacting with the city through her sari, the sari becomes a material text. Each crease and fold of the sari carries the history of her cultural upbringing in Bangladesh.

However, importantly, Alsana's interaction with the saris she wears provides an eco-materialist response to the modern world of fast fashion. Saris are durable and adaptable structures that have respect for materiality. Since the textile is unstitched, there are no specific sizing and trend limitations on it. It is always possible to re-drape the garment according to any changes in a woman's body over decades or generations without having to alter it. In contrast to this approach, modern digital and fast fashion is engineered in such a way that

clothing pieces should be disposed of very quickly once the body shape or a certain trend changes.

Moreover, the materials Alsana uses for her clothing are real and physical, so they need regular maintenance. The process of cleaning, airing, and folding these materials takes a lot of work, which in turn leads to psychological engagement in the use of the artefact. This process breaks the modern consumerist cycle of mindless acquisition and throwing away goods. Alsana sees her clothing not as disposable images but as durable material companions. The portrayal of a character whose ability to withstand psychologically is contingent upon the endurance and sustainability of her fabrics becomes a paradigm of analogue care that has been methodically destroyed by contemporary digital fashion culture.

Samad Iqbal's Uniform: The Nonhuman Weight of Trauma

Unlike Alsana, whose dress acts as an empowering intra-activity that helps her stabilise herself, Samad Iqbal, on the other hand, exemplifies the negative intra-activity that material things can have when they come with the baggage of past traumas and oppression. Samad Iqbal is a veteran of the British Indian Army who fought in the Second World War. Years later, he finds himself in London working as an underemployed waiter in an Indian restaurant in Leicester Square. Throughout the novel, Samad's psychological condition remains highly fragmented; he continues to be stuck between his romanticised visions of honour as a soldier and the humiliation of his civilian life.

Samad's participation in the Second World War involved him donning the weighty khaki uniform of the British Indian Army. As viewed from a new materialism approach, a military uniform is a specially engineered material artefact which is meant to alter the body and behaviour of the person systematically. The stiff canvas, heavy leather boots, and tight metal buttons of the uniform create a particular way of standing, limit certain kinds of movement, and promote some other types of movement. This training prepares the body for obedience, vigilance, and aggression. It is in this context that the uniform provided Samad with purpose, masculinity, and historical significance. Contrastingly, due to the severe trauma suffered by Samad while he was dressed in the military uniform – such as being left with one hand crippled and the betrayal of fellow soldiers – the uniform becomes a material cage. Many years later, after the war ended, Samad still finds himself entrapped within the rigid construct of the uniform.

His physical entrapment is further exacerbated by the uniform that he wears during his civilian days; that is, his waiter's uniform at the Palace of West Bengal restaurant. The uniform that he wears is a stereotypical version of the typical Indian clothes and includes a ruffled shirt and a bow tie. His physical entrapment is embodied using such clothing because, to Samad, wearing such clothes is a form of daily humiliation. The bow tie acts as the symbol of his physical subordination and his commodification by the colonial system. Whenever he wears the restaurant uniform, he is forced to perform his role of servility for the white British customers at the restaurant.

The fact that Samad relies on uniforms that are institutional and historic shows how there has been a failure in identity sustainability. In this novel, it can be noted that Samad does not have any ability to create an identity that can survive within his modern surroundings. Instead, he has been living through various material scripts that keep him stuck in the past. It must be seen how this failure fits within the systemic crises discussed within eco-materialism. For ecological and psychological sustainability, there is a need for adaptation and resilience and the ability to create systems that survive within the environmental situation. By showing the inability of Samad to get free from the material scripts of his uniforms, White Teeth shows the danger of sticking to rigid systems of control. Regarding digital capitalism, this has led to an addiction to online trends whereby the consumer loses autonomy because of the scripts of algorithms on what to wear, buy, and throw away.

Millat Iqbal: The Precursor to Digital Mimicry and Material Disconnection

In contrast, the transition from the first-generation immigrants to the second-generation immigrants highlights the problem of fast fashion and consumer capitalism. This transition serves as a historical link to the current period of the digital age. The second-generation postcolonial subject, Millat Iqbal, is the son of Samad and was brought up in the context of multicultural London, which is highly characterised by global brands, media images, and ready-made clothes. Caught between the expectations of his father, peer pressure, and the images provided by the Western media, Millat is suffering from an intense sense of fragmentation of himself.

Clothing acts as a tool of construction of a performative identity for Millat. His style of dressing is inspired by the masculine icons of cinema, particularly the mobsters of America seen in classic American movies. In order to dress in that manner, Millat depends on the fast procurement of trend-based street fashion clothes: big puffer jackets, tracksuits, designer sneakers, and carefully styled hair. Under the new materialism approach, Millat utilises these clothes that are mass-produced in order to temporarily mend the cracks in his psychological well-being. The bulkiness of the puffer jacket gives him the feeling of empowerment and protection from the hostile environment.

Nonetheless, since such clothes in the fast-fashion industry are produced from cheap and artificial fabric, the sense of security they bring is temporary. There is a weak material bond between Millat and his clothes. The puffer jacket or branded sneakers do not provide a profound link to history, craft, or personal experience but rather provide a transient appearance that becomes useless as soon as the fashion system introduces another trend. As a result, Millat is compelled to engage in hyper-consumption, constantly getting rid of old clothes and buying new ones. This practice corresponds completely to the practices of consumers causing the fast-fashion crisis worldwide.

Millat's character represents the ultimate analogue precursor to the modern-day digital consumer of fashion in the 2020s. He considers his clothes based on the media-driven approach

where appearance is valued more than the tangible substance of the garments. He fails to see through the concealed material expenses that come with his choice of fashion: the extraction of petrochemical resources necessary for making the polyester of his jackets, contamination of rivers in the developing world with poisonous dyes, and exploitation of labour associated with his cheap purchases. Fashion is something entirely divorced from nature in Millat's case. The absence of the material link makes the machinery of fast fashion function unhindered, which is a warning to the fact that treating clothes as appearance instead of an environmental resource is destructive on a global scale.

The Digital Turn: Algorithmic Ghosting and Fast-Fashion Culture in the 2020s

To fully grasp the evolution from Millat's analogue mimicking process to today's environmental degradation, we need to consider how the new digital era of the 2020s has transformed consumer practices. Today, the market environment is characterised by fast fashion groups who employ real-time analytics, AI technology, and search algorithms to produce and promote clothing items in record time. In this respect, the process from idea to the item delivered to consumers' doors is reduced to days. This accelerated pace is driven by social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where outfits of the day culture is widespread.

Within this algorithmic landscape, clothes experience the phenomenon of dematerialisation. Consumers' contact with clothes becomes limited to high-definition, highly filtered pictures viewed on a smartphone screen. Online platforms are designed in such a way that they provide consumers with immediate satisfaction through an infinite scrolling feed, one-click purchasing, and various kinds of discount games. In this way, consumers are purposefully distanced from the materiality of clothes, including their weight, their origin, and their impact on the environment. Clothes are no longer seen as environmentally demanding goods made by humans. They become simply pixels—weightless and disposable.

The process of dematerialisation disconnects the necessary material interaction that has conventionally been the basis for human fashion. The analogue situation presents itself where a person touches the material of the garment, weighs it, and determines how durable it is against the person's skin. This process results in an understanding of the materiality of the product and, thus, material attachment. However, in the digital world, physical interaction gives way to visual interaction. The consumer purchases an image of the garment so that it will reflect their image on the digital platform. In doing so, the consumer falls into the realm of algorithmic ghosting.

The eco-materialist impacts of the move from digital to analogue are apocalyptic for the stability of our planet. Since the consumer is separated from the actual materiality of the garment by digital fashion websites, the controls on excessive consumption are stripped away. Consumers indulge in frequent and cost-effective buying practices and end up having large amounts of clothing made from petroleum-based materials like polyester and nylon. These fabrics do not degrade; instead, they end up piling up in landfills in the developing world or

decompose into toxic microplastics. With the help of digital images taking over from analogue fashion garments, consumer culture has devised a system of mass environmental destruction through psychological detachment.

Synthesis: Narrative Fiction as a Material Agent

The differing approaches to materiality in *White Teeth* and the fashion industry in digital times enable us to develop an approach for resolving the environmental issue of today. This interdisciplinarity shows that the source of hyper-consumption is not a failure of either infrastructure or economy, but rather a transformation in the way humans perceive things. In order to resolve the destruction caused by fast fashion, the world needs to close the value-action gap and reconnect people from the abstractness of digital fashion back to eco-materialism.

This paper contends that narrative fiction holds a vital place in this process, serving as a material agent in its own right. Literature acts as an active training field and simulator for material empathy. In reading a fictional analogue narrative of fashion such as *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith, the reader does not just become acquainted with the concepts of cultural displacement or historical trauma. Rather, the reader goes through an embodiment of the experience of the physical, tactile materials within the story via the process of cognitive narratology. In this way, the reader feels the weight of Alsana's silk saris, the restriction of Samad's khaki uniforms, and the fragile protection of Millat's puffer jackets.

Through the introduction of tactile weight and gravity back into the consciousness of our apparel, cognitive fashion stories counteract the frictionless thinking of contemporary digital consumerism. The act of reading forces the reader to pause, fostering appreciation for the material history, craftsmanship, and slowly built memories attached to an item of clothing. This process is necessary for the development of emotional longevity and a repair mindset in the real world. People who know how to feel the material reality of their clothes are much more unlikely to view them as disposable pixels.

Furthermore, this eco-materialist framework provides insights for fashion designers, educators, and environmental policymakers. To build a sustainable future, the fashion industry must look beyond simple technological fixes like textile recycling or bio-synthetic development. Design education should integrate the principles of material ecocriticism, training future designers to prioritise emotional durability and create garments that foster deep bodily and psychological attachments. Environmental campaigns should move away from abstract statistics and instead use narrative strategies that connect with consumers on an emotional, sensory level. By reframing sustainability as an empowering return to material connection rather than a restrictive sacrifice, societies can foster a resilient culture of responsibility and long-term environmental stewardship.

This study has shown how current issues surrounding the environment in the context of fast fashion relate to the dematerialisation of clothes in digital culture. Using two new terms — analogue and digital fashion storylines in conjunction with material ecocriticism in the analysis of *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith — it has been shown how human clothing

becomes a storytelling nonhuman agent. The material fates of three characters in the novel — Alsana Begum, Samad Iqbal, and Millat Iqbal — demonstrate that the moment a person is alienated from the materiality and history of the clothing she or he wears, there is a descent into cycles of alienation and destructive consumption. On the other hand, there is an important message showing that when clothes are given proper material attention and historical consideration, they can become sources of psychological strength and care for the environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlights the important role played by environmental humanities and material ecocriticism in attaining sustainable futures on planet Earth. While technological breakthroughs and policies alone are not enough to break the deeply ingrained cycle of overconsumption resulting from digital capitalism, the material preservation and climate change activism required would entail the restructuring of our cognitive systems that determine the way people behave in their environment. This is where narrative fiction comes into play as a simulator that allows the reader to feel the effects of material estrangement and test new models of caring, longevity, and interdependence.

In this way, understanding the active role that our clothing plays is a prerequisite for breaking down the throwaway attitude that is a hallmark of contemporary consumerism. However, by embracing the agency of our clothes, we take the first vital step towards overcoming the throw-away attitude of contemporary consumer capitalism. Through treating our clothes as reliable allies for our daily existence, we create a sustainable future that will correspond to the needs of the world. The novel *White Teeth*, written by Zadie Smith, warns and guides us. It makes us realise that we are not just living on the ever-changing planet, but in the very fibres which determine its fate. Through seeing our clothing as something with which we have a lasting relationship, we will be able to create a sustainable future that adheres to the global mandates of environmental justice and conservation.

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